

THE IMAGE OF THE ARAB IN ISRAELI LITERATURE

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ONE OF THE first and, by now, classic confrontations between Arab and Jew in modern Hebrew literature is depicted in a short vignette by Yosef H̥ayyim Brenner. Walking homeward through a Jaffa grove one evening in 1921, Brenner happened to meet a young Arab boy whom he recognized as a citrus worker. Casually questioning the boy, Brenner learned to his dismay that the boy was working an inordinate number of hours in the groves for terribly meager pay—a few pennies per day. The writer, long sensitive to the plight of the impoverished working class, sympathized with the boy and pondered his plight from the point of view of the Jewish settlers' moral liability.

My young brother! It does not matter whether the scholars are right or not, whether we are blood relations or not; I feel you are my responsibility. I must enlighten you and teach you the ways of human relationships. [Not socialism or revolution or politics at all] though we might be involved in these out of despair, because we have no choice. No, not these. But the contact between one human being and another . . . now . . . and for generations to come . . . with no other purpose or goal . . . than the wish to be a brother, a companion, a friend . . .¹

1. In Brenner (1960, p. 212). My translation—W. B.

Brenner's perception of the young Arab is that of a soul brother, a fellow sufferer, a victim of powerlessness and economic persecution. The boy's naiveté has been exploited, his innocence and youth defiled both by local landowners and by generations of socio-cultural forces. Though Brenner's pose in this vignette is apolitical, all his social and political thinking comes to bear in this brief encounter. His rhetoric of "despair" and "no choice" sums up his basic-human-rights philosophy for the Jewish settlement in Eretz Yisrael, a philosophy which presumes to move beyond conventional systems of social thought and action (much the same as the notion of non-violence has done in recent times), in order to project a deeply moralistic, even spiritual tenor of unequivocal justice. In this sense, the young Arab boy is a symbol of all downtrodden peoples whose inalienable rights have been abrogated; and Brenner's declaration of responsibility to and mutuality with this symbolic figure of the Arab bespeaks his view of the plight of the Jew at that time. Identification, not tolerance, is the issue; Arab and Jew are brothers, not enemies; they are united, in Brenner's egalitarian vision, by common human needs and goals.

Brenner's death at the hand of Arab marauders in Jaffa—only a few weeks after this sketch was written—is certainly a terribly tragic irony of history.² His symbolic perspective stands, however, as a keynote journalistic piece in the annals of modern Hebrew literature's treatment of the Arab. Most later writers who offered fictional portraits of Arab figures followed Brenner's example by projecting through these images central aspects of their own self-views, aspects of their own feelings and experiences in pre- and post-1948 Israel.

In the early decades of the century, much of the literature depicting Arabs consisted of a folkloristic or local-color type of fiction. In the "boney 'arab" stories of Smilansky (1874–1953) and the collected works of Shami (1889–1949), for example, the reader is presented with varied, quasi-ethnological portrayals of Arab life: their customs, tribal ceremonies, rivalries, foods, love relationships.³ Generally this genre of literature depicts Arab society as a self-contained world, with little or no intrusion by alien outsiders; it is akin to the glimpses of inner, native life rendered by Cooper and Kipling in Nineteenth Century fiction.

2. The piece, entitled "mippinqas," appeared in *quntres*, April, 1921. Brenner was killed on May 1.

3. See Smilansky (1927) and Shami (1972).

The image which dominates this local-color literature is the nomad, the Bedouin. Representing a reality so far removed from the circumscribed experience of the shtetl-born Jew, the Bedouin was a most romantic figure. He was a primitive being, at home in the untamed, natural setting of the fearsome desert; he was an exotic figure, full of mystery, intrigue, impulsive violence and instinctive survival; he was at once a bold victor and a vulnerable victim of political power struggles and inimical surroundings.

It was probably more for his naturalness, his ways of accommodation to a hostile environment, that the Bedouin represented for these writers their own encounter with the pristine land, their own wish for a settled adjustment to the unfamiliar, recalcitrant, new country. These vicarious notions of "naturalness" and "rootedness" seem to have attracted the Hebrew writers to the nomad as a central character.⁴ Beyond these factors, the Bedouin also may have represented a figure parallel to the Jewish watchmen (*Shomrim*): a gallant, swashbuckling horseman, the epitome of the dashing, romantic hero. The Bedouin was the Eastern version, it may be said, of a combined cowboy-Indian chief persona. (Hollywood's depiction of Valentino as "The Sheik" combines several of these highly romanticized ingredients.) Both the Bedouin tribesmen and the *Shomer* were thus figments of a frontier society imagination.

Shami's rendition of the Bedouin's unmitigated love for his horse (with the accompanying jealousy) exemplifies these elements of the fiction:

Mansur went inside the tent and entered the women's compartment to give his instructions. While he was thus engaged, the slave slowly approached the mare until he was within two or three paces of her. Looking about him, and making sure no one was near to observe him, he stared intently into her eyes and whispered a magic spell.

The mare stared back at the slave, as if studying him. He went up to her, passed his finger tips caressingly over her head and along her back, rubbed her head, patted her flank and legs, and wound her long glossy tail about his arm, exposing the green beads and grains of gum ammoniac threaded on its hairs. The mare thrust her long head toward him, and muzzled his arm. She twitched her muscles, distended her nostrils, tossed her mane and stamped.

4. Cf. Shamir (1969, p. 184). See also Citrin (1973, pp. 10ff).

As Mansur came out of the tent, he was astonished to see the slave embracing his mare's head, kissing her forehead and giving her a handful of parched corn mixed with grains of salt. She was chewing with relish, craning her neck toward him and licking his full hand. Her large moist eyes looked at him fearlessly and watched his movements with interest.

A shadow of apprehension, jealousy and anxiety crossed Mansur's face. The sight of the Negro courting his mare disturbed him. Who could this man be? he wondered. He thought he had seen him once, but could not remember where. Coldly, he said: "The food is ready. Go and eat in God's name."⁵

This genre of literature appears to be fairly naive. (Perhaps changing tastes on the part of a readership removed from the particular milieu described in the fiction have accentuated an already apparent quaintness.) The "noble savage" figure of the Arab, however, overcame this naiveté by projecting a vital, romantic model for the "new Jew" in Eretz Yisrael. The Jewish pioneer was then forging a totally new, vigorous existence for himself in an unfamiliar land. He saw himself as a *halutz*, actively fulfilling A. D. Gordon's notions of the return to and unity with nature, the soulful, "religious" immersion in toil, the cosmic repair and regeneration of Jewish roots in new, healthy soil. The Bedouin thus represented for the Jew in the Palestinian Mandate period wishful possibilities of his own self-renewal as a deghettoized, liberated, natural human being.

Another prominent theme in this Arab-oriented literature is the love affair. Here, too, certain motifs parallel those already current in contemporary Hebrew fiction about Jewish love experiences. For example, Smilansky's story about a Sheikh's daughter,⁶ promised against her will to someone she does not love, parallels similar depictions of misguided matches in stories by M. Y. Berdyczewski and Y. Steinberg. Steinberg's "bat haraḥ"⁷ bears an especially close resemblance to the Smilansky story, since it tells the tragic tale of a Rabbi's daughter. The lamentable situation of both heroines is heightened by their respective social

5. "beyn ḥolot hayāšimon," in Shami (1972, p. 132). Quotation taken from "Hamamah: A Tale of the Arabian Desert," in *Tehilla and Other Israeli Tales* (London and New York, 1956), p. 122. Translated by I. Schen. See also "haššek vəsusato," in Smilansky (1927, vol. II, pp. 196–216).

6. "bat haššek," in Smilansky (1927, vol. I, pp. 47–52).

7. In Steinberg (1957, pp. 122–129).

prominence and imposed public responsibility. More effective—and melodramatic—is the love affair between Arab and Jew. Perhaps the most extended portrayal of such a taboo-ridden relationship is to be found in the novel *ba'al bə'ammav* by Y. Burla.⁸ Doomed from the start, the secret love affair between Gideon and Hamada is reminiscent of similar “strange loves” in earlier fiction by Berdyczewski and Hazaz. Predominant in these works is the notion of taboo: love for the outsider eventually meets with downfall and despair in a romantic, psychological sense, if not in socio-cultural terms.⁹

The first generation of Israeli writers—among them S. Yizhar, B. Tammuz, M. Shamir, and A. Megged—produced a number of short stories about Arabs.¹⁰ For the most part, these stories reflect issues of concern with regard to the “Arab problem” in the newly-founded Jewish state. The central issues are Arab displacement from their land and property, the victimization of innocent villagers by forces beyond their control, and the agonized feelings of loss in terms of personal relations or possibilities of peace. The point of view is sympathetic; the tone, whether strident or understated, is clearly moralistic.

One of the best known stories of this generation is “*haššaḅuy*” by S. Yizhar.¹¹ Once again the central Arab figure is a Bedouin, a shepherd who, though merely an innocent bystander, is taken captive by an Israeli patrol during the 1948–49 War of Independence. The narrator’s view of the platoon commander is blatantly sardonic; he seems impelled to take “some action,” to accomplish “something concrete” no matter how inane or trivial. The story’s dramatic effect derives mainly from the underlying conflict between the empty purposefulness of the military command (the shepherd is interrogated and beaten harshly) and the strong ambivalence of the soldier-narrator, who struggles with his sense of duty and his concomitant feelings of basic, human empathy.

From the very start the dualism of character and theme is fixed: the

8. Published as a volume in Burla’s collected works, *kitḇey Yehuda Burla*. On this subject see also “*latīfa*,” in Smilansky (1927, vol. I, pp. 1–6).

9. Other authors of this generation who wrote on the Arab include Y. Aricha, P. Bar-Adon, M. Stavi, and Y. Bar-Yosef. See Bachur (1964).

10. Bachur (1964) briefly surveys some of this literature. Her point of view, however, is apologetic and her classifications somewhat superficial. Citrin (1973) notes an anthology of short stories on these themes which includes works by several first generation Israeli writers, i.e., Aricha (1963).

11. *ḥirbet ḥiz'eh—haššaḅuy* (Merhavia, 1949). Also collected in Yizhar (1959, pp. 113–138).

soldiers are the strong, booted interlopers, who trample the peaceful field of grain and capture the harmless shepherd. They intrude into the quiet, idyllic scene to complete their questionable task. Yet the inner view the soldiers have of themselves is close to that of the innocent Bedouin: they, too, in their consciousnesses are immersed in "golden valleys of grain—the kind of world that fills you with peace." They yearn for the "good, fertile earth" and the kibbutz harvest, "not to be one of the squad which the sergeant was planning to thrust bravely into the calm of the afternoon."¹²

The caustic irony turns moralistic in the story's sequence. The dilemma of responsibility vs. conscience, however, goes unresolved; for the jeep which carries the prisoner off to the next (presumably more intensive) bout of interrogation travels over a flat, undefined plain "of no river beds, no hills, no ascent or descent, no trees, no villages . . . a vast expanse stretching to infinity."¹³ Through parallel structuring of the story's opening and closing passages, Yizhar alters the scene from lush vegetation—the scene of the crime—to boundless flatlands—the locus of unattainable answers.

At the dramatic center of this work is the individual conscience. But it is the view rendered of the group, the unit of soldiers themselves, which supplies much of the story's tone of bitter recrimination.

One man was taking pictures of the whole scene, and on his next leave he would develop them. And there was one who sneaked up behind the prisoner, waved his fist passionately in the air and then, shaking with laughter, reeled back into the crowd. . . . And there was one wearing an undershirt who, astonished and curious, exposed his rotten teeth; many dentists, a skinny shrew of a wife, sleepless nights, narrow, stuffy rooms, unemployment, and working for "the party" had aggravated his eternal query of "Nu, what will be?"

And there were some who had steady jobs, some who were on their way up in the world, some who were hopeless cases to begin with, and some who rushed to the movies and all the theatres and read the week-end supplements of two newspapers. And there were some who knew long passages by heart from Horace and Prophet Isaiah and from Chaim Nachman Bialik and even from Shakespeare; some who loved their children and their

12. Taken from "The Prisoner," in Blocker (1965, p. 153). Translated by V. C. Rycus.

13. Blocker (1965, pp. 173f). On these aspects of landscape background, cf. Miron (1962, pp. 283–297).

wives and their slippers and the little gardens at the sides of their houses; . . . some who were not at all what they seemed and some who were exactly what they seemed. There they all stood, in a happy circle around the blind-folded prisoner, who at that very moment extended a calloused hand . . . and said to them: "Fi, cigara?" A cigarette?¹⁴

All elements of Israeli society are included in this group portrait. Yizhar points his finger at them all, from the most common to the most educated, from the most predictable to the most pretentious. They all encircle the Bedouin in mirthful camaraderie. However, the passage bears a more subtle meaning as well: all these soldiers seem torn from their normal milieus, from their familiar houses and newspapers. Like the shepherd, torn suddenly from his idyllic ambience, the soldiers themselves are victims of uprootedness and aberration. The Bedouin's innocent request merely highlights the totality of innocence which the war has harshly abrogated.

Among the other prominent writers of Yizhar's generation B. Tammuz is particularly to be noted for his literary treatment of the Arab problem. In his well-known story "taḥarut šəḥiyya," ("The Swimming Race"),¹⁵ Tammuz poignantly portrays the loss of all possibility of friendship between Israelis and Arabs through a three-tracked passage to an ironic maturity: from boy to soldier, from swimming race to battlefield, from ingenuous playfulness (with a little Arab girl) to gratuitous killing (of the girl's uncle). The paradox of losing (in the race) and winning (in battle) projects the author's feelings of a fruitless, tragic progression. In a similar though more blatantly allegorical vein, the 1972 novel *happardes* (*The Orchard*) evinces Tammuz's sympathy for the defeated Arab, displaced by war, cheated by power and history. The family chronicle—with fratricide its central disaster—and the lovely orchard embody Tammuz's rather transparent political commentary on the sins of State and society.¹⁶

Far more subtle and oblique is the treatment given the Arab by a number of second generation Israeli authors. In a story called "navvadim

14. Blocker (1965, pp. 158–159).

15. First published in *Luah Ha'aretz*, 1951, pp. 239–249. A translation appears in *Israel Argosy* (Spring, 1953), pp. 69–84.

16. Citrin (1973) discusses *happardes* at length (see pp. 119–174). I have omitted from my discussion another rather transparent (though interesting) work which both Citrin (pp. 91–118) and Bachur (1964, pp. 46, 58) treat: Yehoshua's (1968, pp. 9–55) "mul haya'arot" (translated as "Facing the Forests" in Yehoshua, *Three Days and a Child*, New York, 1970).

vacepa',"¹⁷ written relatively early in his career, Amos Oz attempts to render through symbolic action a condition of double jeopardy regarding Arab-Israeli relations. The scene is the kibbutz, which, in Oz's imagination, becomes the quintessential setting for modern Israel's inner conflicts. The kibbutz members are seriously considering some sort of paramilitary action to discourage Bedouin shepherds from grazing their flocks too close to kibbutz farmland. The themes of encroachment and projected retaliation intensify within the framework of a dual perspective: the Bedouins are starving, pitiful, primitive innocents; and, simultaneously, they are seen as foreboding, sensual, unfathomable aliens.

The Bedouin shepherd in this story is obviously the literary descendant of Yizhar's captive; but in his depiction Oz emphasizes the dichotomous feelings of attraction and obsessive hatred engendered by the Arab in the Israeli consciousness.

In his dense style, combining both lyric and gothic qualities, Oz weaves a story within a story which projects a fictional social psychology of attitudes toward the Arab. The kibbutz members are united in their recrimination; but Geula, the twenty-nine-year-old spinster coffee-maker, pays no heed. A loner, frustrated in love and hemmed in by group living, Geula walks about in the orchard (described as "heavily laden and fragrant") during the romantic evening hours. Here she confronts the Bedouin in a sensuous scene of mutual but hesitant, unfulfilled seduction. Sickened, presumably, by the Arab's "loathsome touch"—but more probably, by the revulsion at her own illicitness, her flagrant breach of taboo—Geula roams about fitfully. Just as the kibbutz discussion of the external threat reaches its climax, she returns to the orchard to meet her bizarre fate. Sexual fantasies and a strangely quiescent death bring the story to an ambiguous close.

The earth had not succumbed to the cold, but continued to exude a subdued warmth. Red, green, red, green, red winked the planes in the sky. The flashing lights did not distract the viper crawling alongside the girl's body. Rage swept over the serpent, who raised his head and shot out a forked tongue. The viper's anger was not capricious. The girl had chosen to stretch out in the thick of the bushes and in doing so had blocked the entrance to his hole with her body. He wanted to return home, but he could not. His

17. First published in *Ha'aretz*, February 7, 1964. Collected in Oz (1965, pp. 25–41).

eyes bulged with a dull glassiness . . . His body was grey-green and outstretched. The zigzag line stressed his outstretched pose and exaggerated it by contrast. Lost in her poetic reverie, the girl was unlikely to notice the snake. Her eyes were shut, and they did not open when the viper thrust a pair of sharp, venomous upper fangs into her ankle, the lower ones lending stiff support. Geula lifted her foot at the sudden pain and rubbed it with a warm hand. She tried to pull out the thorn which had been thrust into her flesh.

Freed of his venom, the serpent experienced release. In lazy loops he made off from the scene. Exhaustion prevented him from going far . . . His eyes were ever-open. Geula's eyes, too, were open. A heaviness pressed against her ankle. A dull pain, a tender pain penetrated her bloodstream and soothed her whole body, while a sound as of distant bells warned her to get up and look for people. The heaviness overpowered her, and her eyes closed once more. Her knees betrayed her and refused to bend. Weakly she rolled over on her side, curled up and rested her weary head on her arms. A shudder of pleasure rippled over her skin. Now she could listen to the sweet wave sweeping through her body and intoxicating her bloodstream. To this sweet wave Geula responded with complete surrender.¹⁸

Heavy-handed allusiveness and obtrusive symbolism notwithstanding, the orgasmic killing of Geula-Eve by the serpent-lover conveys a dual sense of fulfillment and guilt. Geula's attraction to the Bedouin meets with deadly overdoses of pleasure and pain, reward and punishment. Oz, the social moralist, perseveres through forcefulness of style and bizarre situation to generate a drama of complex psycho-social attitudes toward the Arab. Here, too, it is a vision of self—a heightened, dual vision of hostile repulsion and wished-for intimacy—which dominates the story and transmits its central meaning of torn emotions.

'adam ben keleb (1969) by Y. Kaniuk is a masterful, grueling novel of Holocaust survivors who have become inmates at a fictional "Institution for Rehabilitation and Therapy" in Arad, a settlement in Israel's northern Negev desert.¹⁹ In "Cuckoo's Nest" fashion, Kaniuk offers a jaggedly grotesque, theatrical narrative of madness, interspersed with poignant, ironic flashes of sober awareness. These are the indelible scars, says Kaniuk, which the Holocaust has bequeathed: people reduced to a dog-madness which often envelopes more than just the survivors

18. Taken from Michener (1973, pp. 305–306). Translated by N. de Lange.

19. The novel appeared in English entitled *Adam Resurrected* (New York, 1971), translated by S. Simckes.

themselves. Humanity in its totality is sick; these "survivors" are merely its most bloodied victims.

Near the end of the novel, its movement marked by a growing sense of debasement, the inmates escape into the surrounding desert. Stripped naked by her fellow escapees, bound by chains and wrapped only in newspapers, the elder, sixty-year-old Schwester sister wanders about seeking God. Instead, she confronts a group of Bedouin smugglers. "Shepherds," she says to them, "you're obviously shepherds,"²⁰ and asks them for help. They laugh at her naiveté, at her nakedness, at her helplessness; and then, one by one, they proceed to rape her mercilessly.

The Schwester sister doesn't emit a sound. As though she were dead, as though the heat and the shame had erased her existence. An old woman like me! Actually, she herself couldn't ever believe that the insects loved her with an honest passion. Now she catches sight of the Bedouin laden with watches. His face is riveted upon hers, his eyes do not stir from her white old body. She sees his leg muscles, his huge hands, his eyes that sow fire. If he were to tell her that he was God, she would believe him. His blemished smile, his gold tooth, his leching body, his tortured features impose on her mind the memory of thoughts of ascent, the memory of distant dreams. She will now get her revenge for the humiliation of her empty life, revenge against her idiotic sister, against her failure, her husband, her mustache, against shaving razors, forests, the camp, Cyprus, barbed-wire fences, against the wretched boat, against hostile Israel, against the children who eat bananas and sour cream and chant patriotic songs.²¹

Instead of revulsion and degradation, the Schwester sister feels a certain personal redemption—and she even discovers a miracle: in the rainbow colors of a Bedouin's cascading urine she sees an angel, a sign that "God is not dead"; and she thanks the Bedouins all for what they have done. The ironic blend of debasement and salvation bears Kaniuk's message of an ambiguous, senseless survival.

As in most of the works mentioned in this discussion (especially Yizhar's "haššaḅuy" and Oz's "navvadim vacepa"), the Bedouin shepherds are not really people at all, not even fully developed fictional characters. They are merely figments of emotions or ideas, only embodiments of motifs: innocence, love-hatred, cruel indifference. The in-

20. *Adam Resurrected*, p. 321.

21. *Adam Resurrected*, p. 323.

humanity shown the Schwester sister by the Bedouin rapists is a further sign of humanity's sordidness, its instinctive lack of compassion. Even if there were such compassion, Kaniuk intimates, it would probably be useless for those who have become, through the trauma of torture, nothing more than incarcerated, unwanted outcasts. Kaniuk's portrayal of the desert nomads merely enforces that brutal image of man as a self-gratifying, unconscionable victimizer of the defenseless.

Amalia Kahana-Carmon's work *vəyareah bə'emeq 'ayalon* also has little to do with the Arab problem. It is a novel of resentment, focused on the figure of a Tel Aviv housewife, Noa Talmor, and narrated in a variety of stream-of-consciousness modes. Mrs. Talmor feels desolately alone, abandoned by her husband and his world of "doing," left on the periphery of activity, conversation, romance, and social life. The outlook is grim; the tone, quietly despondent.²²

Near the center of the novel, Mrs. Talmor tours Beersheba with her husband and Philip, a British business associate, toward whom she feels some definite—but undefined and unrealized—affection. Outside a small restaurant (inside the talk consists of typical male-chauvinist bar chatter) she catches sight of a Bedouin woman, patiently waiting for her husband. Noa ponders the Bedouin woman's apparently peripheral place in the social order. Her interior monologue projects a chilling still-life portrait of isolation.

Suddenly the sky turned dark: I am night. Of dirt, debris, and dust. With a tin bracelet, her mouth veiled, a swollen face, eyeless: a woman-beast. A black Sudanese woman. Black Bedouin clothes and a black child, a black hen set before her, she squats and waits outside on the sidewalk. Man is born to toil. And woman, like me, to be forgotten. Who can know your life in darkness, in dust, oh black woman. The Bedouin men in the restaurant, poker-faced. You cannot guess which one she belongs to, which one she is waiting for.²³

The passage is brief but central, for it captures and conveys key aspects of Noa Talmor's own situation. The inner, lyrical voice (similar to that found in parts of Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*), the tone of restrained despair, the themes of abandonment and emotional ambivalence—these understated elements characterize Noa's inner, desperate alienation.

22. See my review of this novel in *Hadoar* LI, 36:616–618.

23. Kahana-Carmon (1971, p. 133). My translation—W. B.

Here, too, the depiction of the Bedouin woman projects a problematic dimension of self.

It seems ironic—but it is indeed typical—that most of the Arab (or Bedouin) figures which appear in contemporary Hebrew literature are portrayed not as the enemy but as reflections of the varied human conditions and concerns on the Israeli scene: social, moral, philosophical, or psychological. The intrinsic study of the image of the Arab in this fiction also demonstrates main trends in Israeli literary history: from the quasi-documentary realism of the twenties and thirties to the current variety of symbolic narrative modes.²⁴ In any case, the several authors discussed here, representative as they are of the wide spectrum of Hebrew literary creativity over the past several decades, clearly have utilized the figure of the Arab to express a variegated, changing montage of Israeli self views.

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24. Cf. Alter (1977).

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